AT THE UNITED NATIONS: WOMEN'S NGOS

They help women entrepreneurs start businesses, assist refugee women and lobby for laws ensuring women's equality. Made up of dynamic, experienced people, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with women's issues are at work all over the world to promote women's causes.

Many NGOs work for women's equality. One example is the International Alliance of Women, which seeks to secure reforms ensuring women's equality of liberty, status and opportunity. The Alliance works to ensure that the United Nations conventions and declarations on women's equality are put into practice, seeking, for instance, to bring national legislation in line with United Nations instruments.

Other NGOs, like the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, seek to protect especially vulnerable women. Aware that refugee women and children make up 80 per cent of the world's 18 million refugees, Commission members visit refugee areas to talk to refugee women and learn of their needs. They then meet with government and United Nations officials, urging support for programmes serving the refugees.

Other NGOs are active in development, like the privately funded Trickle-up Program, which helps poor people start their own businesses. It all begins with a $50 grant to start a profit-making enterprise; a second $50 grant is paid when the enterprise submits a one-page business report after three months. Thanks to this seemingly simple process, by 1991 a total of 23,053 businesses had been started in 92 countries. Women are the majority of new entrepreneurs—62 per cent in 1991—and many businesses are composed entirely of women.

Yet other NGOs, like the League of Women Voters, are active in politics. A non-partisan political organization, the League encourages United States citizens to play an active role in government and works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.

Whatever their area of activity, NGOs working for women's issues make a highly significant contribution to the United Nations, drawing attention to issues, suggesting ideas and programmes, disseminating information on the United Nations and mobilizing public opinion.

UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE

Many women's NGOs are eager to work in alliance with the United Nations. "The United Nations is a catalyst for the women's movement," says Kay Fraleigh, of the International Alliance of Women. "It is important to know the work of the Organization."

Mildred Leet, Co-President of the Trickle-up Program, elaborates: "It is important to be able to turn to a global organization, one where all the world's countries are working together on common problems."

"We have had an observer at the United Nations since 1945," notes Margery Cohen, Observer of the League of Women Voters at the United Nations. "League members are always interested in international issues. They consider the Organization an intrinsic part of international relations and international activities."

Many women's NGOs offer their services to the United Nations. According to Mary Anne Schwalbe of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, "One of our goals is to learn more about what the general body of the United Nations doing in terms of women and children—not only refugees—in developing countries, and see if there is any way we can be of help as an advocacy group, how we can be of use to the United Nations."

The interest is mutual. Each year, resolutions and mandates of United Nations bodies—starting with the General Assembly—provide for consultative, operational, programme and information relationships with NGOs. United Nations officials, from the Secretary-General on down, stress the invaluable contribution of NGOs.

CONSULTATIVE STATUS

The special relation between NGOs and the United Nations is recognized in the United Nations Charter

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(Art. 71), which grants the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) the means to consult with NGOs. ECOSOC resolution 1296 provides a mechanism to grant NGOs a consultative status with the Council, as well as for them to hold consultations with the United Nations Secretariat.

The Economic and Social Council decides to admit NGOs to consultative status on the recommendation of its Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations. Made up of 19 Member States, the Committee meets every two years—most recently in January 1993.

NGOs in consultative status provide the Economic and Social Council with "expert information and advice" and express "important elements of public opinion". They may propose placing items of special interest to the United Nations on the agenda of ECOSOC. They may designate United Nations representatives to sit as observers at public meetings of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. They may submit written statements and make oral statements to the Council and its committees. They may also be requested to carry out studies or prepare papers.

Some 930 NGOs have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. In addition, many NGOs are associated with departments and offices of the United Nations Secretariat, specialized agencies and other bodies.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

More than 1,300 NGOs are associated with the United Nations Department of Public Information (DPI). The Department's weekly briefings for NGOs focus on topics such as women and the environment, women and human rights, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and the activities of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).

For the many women's NGOs associated with DPI, spreading the word on United Nations action is a major component of their work. Many use their newsletters to inform their constituencies about United Nations activities relating to women.

Others seek to alert the general public through mainstream publications. "We try to get articles on refugees in magazines and newspapers," Schwalbe says. "The other thing we try to do is to talk to women's organizations and students (in the United States), to make them aware of the refugee situation world wide. We often speak at schools, talking to parents, teachers and children. I have never been at a school where the teachers or the children had the faintest idea of the situation, of the number of refugees, or of who is working for them. We do quite a lot of talking about UNHCR (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)."

The League of Women Voters, too, works to encourage United Nations education in schools. "We contact boards of education, administrators, parents and teachers," Cohen explains. "On request, we speak on the United Nations to local organizations, to League groups and to United Nations Associations groups."

Some NGOs produce their own educational material on the United Nations, ranging from booklets to videos. They obtain their background information from the United Nations and produce high-quality material.

ADVOCACY

Many women's NGOs are involved in lobbying—the term "advocacy" is preferred—to advance their cause. To do this, NGO members approach government delegates at United Nations meetings or get in touch with Missions—countries' embassies to the United Nations.

"We make our views known to delegates from both industrial and developing countries," Leet says. "We talk to the delegates in the meeting halls and in the corridors. There are times you go to the Mission."

"We lobby delegates on various issues," says Bea Milwe of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. "We have a branch in England, which asks delegates to vote a certain way. We intervene with some of the delegates when we want them to introduce certain concerns."

"We contact our Congresspeople, send telegrams to the President urging him to pay the back United States dues, to rejoin the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)," Milwe adds. "We also have an office in Washington. The person who works there does lobbying in Congress ... on all issues pertaining to our agenda. And we form coalitions with other lobbies."

"The Governments are the ones really doing things," says Kay Fraleigh. "You can tell your own Government: 'Well, this is what you said at the United Nations, now you do it.' We try to stretch the limits."

INFLUENCE

Women's NGOs also seek to exert influence at United Nations meetings. NGOs in consultative status regularly attend the sessions of the Economic and Social Council, of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and of the Commission on the Status of Women—the main United Nations policy-making body on women's issues.

"We attend the meetings of the Commission and the Committee," says Kay Fraleigh. "We make statements, learn from others, find Governments that are supportive of what we are doing. At the last session of the Commission, NGOs were extremely active, because of the upcoming women's conference in 1995."

NGOs carry a certain weight by working closely with the United Nations. "We have influence at UNHCR by collaborating with them," Schwalbe maintains. "We go to Geneva every fall to talk to all the UNHCR bureau heads about what we did last year and ask them what they would like us to do, what we should focus on the next year. Sometimes we meet with the High Commissioner and always with the Senior Coordinator on Refugee Women and Children. She puts us in touch with those who deal with women and children."

Women's NGOs work in close connection with various other UN bodies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and INSTRAW.

NETWORKING

Women's NGOs work and network together on issues of common concern. "The United Nations ...is also a place where the NGOs meet people from all over the world who are working on the same issues," Milwe says.

"We work together on statements, strategies, trying to share information, to know more about an area," adds Fraleigh. "We meet at least once a month, follow what the United Nations is doing, have representatives from the United Nations and Governments who come and speak to NGOs on what is happening."

Women's NGOs working at United Nations Headquarters have formed an NGO Committee on the Status of Women. Made up of some 60 NGOs in consultative status, the Committee is now working towards the 1995 World Conference. It also organizes seminars, consultations and monthly briefings for NGOs.

The Conference on NGOs in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (CONGO) serves as a representative voice of NGOs before the United Nations. It seeks to ensure that NGOs in consultative status enjoy the fullest opportunities and facilities for performing their functions; to provide a forum for consultations; and to convene meetings of NGOs to exchange views on matters of common interest.

Several units of the United Nations Secretariat work to maintain regular contact between the United Nations and NGOs. The NGO Unit of the Department of Economic and Social Development services the ECOSOC Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations and is the focal point of the relationship between NGOs in consultative status and the Economic and Social Council. The Non-Governmental Liaison Service, with offices in New York and Geneva, deals mainly with NGOs working on development.

The NGO Section of the United Nations Department of Public Information keeps NGOs abreast of United Nations activities and helps them spread information on the work of the Organization. It organizes an annual conference, an NGO orientation course, periodic workshops and weekly briefings, while maintaining an information unit, the NGO Resource Centre.

The DPI-NGO Executive Committee serves as the liaison between the Department of Public Information and the NGOs associated with it. Joint information activities have included a permanent exhibit on NGOs at United Nations Headquarters and an information brochure on NGOs.

MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD

Many women's NGOs today are striving to expand their role at the United Nations, seeking, for instance, a higher profile at the meetings of United Nations bodies.

But one problem they face is that of time constraints. "When you have an eight-day meeting involv-

ing 45 Member States, it is difficult to deliver your message," Fraleigh says. "Another problem is a hierarchical one. At meetings you are not seen as very important by Governments."

Nor do the agendas of NGOs and those of the United Nations always coincide. The United Nations is a community of Governments, while NGOs represent special interests, mainly of grass-roots groups.

"We could be better utilized to work for the United Nations," argues Milwe. "Instead, it is always a struggle to try to get into meetings. This is one of the most important things that could be done: more power for the NGOs. We are heard only on special matters, when they ask NGOs to give a report. And even then, they only ask a few of us."

"Many NGOs have specialists . . . but they are not listened to," she adds. "Government delegations stand up and speak. NGOs should be able to stand up and speak as well. It is very difficult to change the United Nations rules, but the rules could be reinterpreted. Governments are supposed to represent the people, not just themselves. We, the NGOs, are supposed to be the people."

Some Governments, however, make good use of the potential of NGOs. For example, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands have invited NGO youth representatives to make statements on behalf of their countries at the Economic and Social Council. The United States has had NGO representatives make official presentations on specific themes.

NGO members are also increasingly appointed to national delegations, Leet says. "We like to think that more and more NGOs are put in delegations, not only by the United States, but by various other countries. In the United Nations General Assembly, there are always NGO representatives in some delegations."

"It will happen more and more in developing countries, too," she says. "Take Africa, for example, where a lot of NGOs are being created. Then they form groups of NGOs and become more sophisticated about the role of NGOs. They realize that they have power. Eventually Governments will put them in delegations. That is very important, because NGOs are 'We the peoples'," Leet adds, quoting the opening words of the United Nations Charter.

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THE BIGGEST TASK

Women's NGOs working with the United Nations face the challenge of dealing with a vast, sometimes global constituency. Says Fraleigh: "The major job for NGOs is to work with their own affiliates, to have their constituency use the work of the United Nations and apply it in their own countries.... The most difficult thing is to keep your affiliates informed about what is happening and to activate them. The problem is how to use what you learned internationally at the local level."

"We are very privileged to be here, to get an international perspective, to understand," she adds. "Here there are hopes and possibilities that cut across all lines."

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